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An Jera Cɛla (We Share a Husband): Song as Social Comment on Polygamy in Southern Mali

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on a genre of songs from southern Mali commonly known in Bamanan as *ladilikan* or “words of advice”, songs that comment in a variety of ways on marriage, particularly polygyny or *sinaya*, the main Bamanan term for polygyny (referring specifically to the relations between co-wives). Originally sung in a domestic setting and performed mostly (though not exclusively) by Mali’s female vocalists, *ladilikan* songs now circulate widely through audio and video recordings and have become a vehicle for publically expressing otherwise hidden discourses and ambivalent feelings about polygynous marriage, without critiquing the institution itself.

A crucial feature of *ladilikan* is its use of a “double voice”, a device in which the singer subtly presents both sides of an issue, leaving the overall message ambiguous. The widespread popularity of *ladilikan* songs such as *An Jera Cɛla*, despite (or because of?) their apparently contradictory and sometimes bombastic lyrics and video clips, is noteworthy. This analysis is based on three decades of research and interaction with some of Mali’s most celebrated artists, who give their own explanations of intended meanings, plus in some cases, their personal views on polygyny. It demonstrates that *ladilikan* themes and strategies are rooted in tradition and have a real basis in fact, and ultimately shows the importance of the genre as a reflection of local thought.

KEYWORDS: *ladilikan*, polygyny, women singers, *sinaya*, co-wives

Introduction

Amidst Mali’s celebrations of its fiftieth anniversary of independence in 2010, one of Mali’s top divas - the *jelimuso* [female *jeli*] Babani Sirani Koné - had a hit with her song *An Djera Tchela*¹ - “We Share a Husband.” Despite being

the opening track of her album entitled *Maliba* (Great Mali), which she released as a tribute to Mali's anniversary celebrations, *An Djera Tihela* is not, as might be expected, about the glorious history of this West African country. Instead, it concerns co-wife relations in a polygynous marriage. Sung from the perspective of a co-wife, it raises an issue rarely discussed in public: the ill-feelings that may arise between co-wives because of differences in their personal habits and hygiene. And it does so with some harsh language.

Babani Koné's album *Maliba* was self-published in CD format and, inspired by international releases, she chose to include detailed liner notes, with photos and comments to each track in her own words in both French and English, thus giving some interesting insights into her thoughts behind the repertoire on the album. Liner notes, if included at all in locally produced cassettes or CDs in Mali, tend to be minimal, just listing tracks, musicians and arrangers. For the track *An Djera Tihela*, Babani writes:

Polygamy is an essential component of the traditional family in Mali. This implies that a man can share four wives. Married life is therefore a constant competition, where the wife who has the qualities of respect, humility, tenderness, attachment to the education of women... etc, comes to triumph. She usually is the one that draws the admiration of her husband. Do they all receive the same treatment? That is a question! (quoted from the English language version of the original liner notes, CD "*Maliba*", Bamako 2010).

That question is answered by the actual words sung, which refer to the co-wife as a "donkey" (*fali*) who does not attend to her hair, clean the house or cook for three months. "How can you compare me to her?" Babani sings (or at least, implies). "We may share a husband, but to say we're equal? This is drivel. I am the better one."²

An Djera Tihela is one of many songs that Malian female artists have recorded since the 1970s which comment from various perspectives on polygyny, i.e. marriage to more than one wife. "Polygamie" is the French term used in the civil marriage ceremony, in which the couple must sign for either "monogamie" or "polygamie" (see Bruce Whitehouse's paper in this volume; there is more discussion of this below). From the man's perspective, the Bamanan noun for polygamy would be *musucamantigiya* (literally, the owner of several wives) while monogamy would be *musokelentigiya* (the owner of one wife). But probably the most widely used Bamanan term for polygyny is *sinaya*. This specifically refers to the relationship between co-wives, and also to the rivalry between them. One Malian described *sinaya* to me as "a concept, an act of survival" in polygynous marriage.

Sinaya and *sinamuso* (co-wife) are words that abound in local song titles and lyrics in women's songs, suggesting that relations between co-wives are the subject of much concern. Indeed, even in educated urban families, mothers, aunts and grandmothers advise their daughters on how to protect themselves

from the behaviour and actions of co-wives in the likely event of “sharing a husband”.³

Such songs are adapted from a much older traditional repertoire generally referred to in Maninka and Bamanan as *ladilikan*, a term that can be translated as “words of advice.”⁴ Both *jelis* and non-hereditary singers of southern Mali, male and female, have cited this repertoire as an important source of inspiration, along with the *tɛgere tulon* (girls’ hand-clapping songs and dances; see figure 1), which often address similar topics though in a more embryonic way.⁵

This article offers an analysis of the *ladilikan* genre as a contribution to recent work on marriage in Mali by both Emily Burrill and Bruce Whitehouse. Burrill’s research looks primarily at French colonial records of marriage and divorce in Sikasso in the early 1900s, providing invaluable insights into the status of women and children in Mali during the transition into colonial rule (Burrill 2015); while Whitehouse (2017) looks at civil marriage records in Bamako at the turn of the 21st century, querying specifically why polygyny remains so entrenched. Both follow up their archival work with oral testimony. This article suggests that *ladilikan* songs have always played an important role in voicing ideas about marriage, and they both support and nuance the findings of Burrill and Whitehouse.

My analysis is based on three decades of research in Mali, in which I have worked with many musicians - especially singers, both male and female - not



Figure 1: *Tɛgere tulon*: Kouyaté girls in Garana, Segou, 2010

just as ethnographer but as music producer of their albums. My concept of music production is low-key and not particularly interventionist, but it does involve processes of choice and arrangement of repertoire. All of this requires in-depth discussion of the history, content and style of songs, discussion that provides rich material for research, and many of the ideas presented in this article derive from those encounters. The artists I have been fortunate to work with have repeatedly drawn my attention to the centrality of *ladilikan* in contemporary Malian song. In this paper, I will examine song lyrics⁶ and their “double voice” strategies, quoting from interviews I have conducted with the artists themselves, including Oumou Sangaré, Babani Koné, Hawa Kassé Mady Diabaté, Abdoulaye Diabaté and the late Sidiki Diabaté, who have offered their own explanations of intended meanings and the power of song to impart advice, plus in some cases, their personal views on polygyny.

Babani Koné, whose song *An Djera Tchela* is the title of this paper, is one of Mali’s most popular female singers, though she is not well-known to international audiences. A *jelimuso* from Segou in central Mali who like many musicians lives in the capital, Bamako, she is in high demand around the country and across the Malian diaspora to sing at the vibrant wedding parties organized by and for women, usually held in the streets, called *sumu*. *Sumus* have been an important context for live music performance since the early 1990s, and they privilege the female voice.

Babani Koné rose to fame in the mid 1990s with her song *Sanou Djala*,⁷ the “golden head sash”, a sash tied around the head that is worn with pride by Mali’s “godmothers” or *dembaw*, the maternal aunts and close female relatives who organize and finance the *sumus* and look after the bride’s interests. Babani cites the *dembaw* as her main patrons. Thus her context for performance is primarily the wedding parties, and women are her main audiences and patrons (figure 2).

When in the early 2000s Babani divorced her husband because of his alleged philandering, her popularity increased exponentially with young Malian women who would rush to congratulate her at any personal encounter, for example at a wedding or other musical event in Bamako where Babani was appearing. Her fan base say that she has a special talent for singing about women’s issues, of which she has a deep understanding. As with many of the best known *jelimusow*, Babani is consulted at home on a regular basis by her patrons and fans to discuss their problems and anxieties, and she incorporates some of the stories and phrases she hears into her songs.⁸ When Babani sang *An Djera Tchela* in 2011 on television on the popular Mali Television program, *Top Etoiles*, her audience, who was predominantly female,⁹ followed her movements in their seats as she performed Segou’s *janjigi* dance, and they mouthed the words to the song, making special emphasis on the line with “donkey”: *fali*¹⁰.

“Fali! That’s nothing! We call our co-wives by all kinds of names - bats, cats, hyenas, anything you like. We may do this with humour, but underneath there



Figure 2: Babani Koné at a sumu in Bamako, 2006

are bad feelings” explains the *jelimuso* Hawa Kassé Mady Diabaté, daughter of one of Mali’s best known male vocalists, Kassé Mady Diabaté, and a powerful singer in her own right, who performs mainly at wedding parties in Mali (figure 3).

Hawa quotes a popular saying: *Sinamuso sinaya*, a *jelenba ye gala ye* (the co-habitation of co-wives, its whiteness is indigo). She explains the meaning of this as “no matter how much co-wives seem to get on, underneath there is a darkness in their relations” (personal communication with author, 2016). Indeed, accounts of rivalry - *fadenya* - between co-wives and their children are intrinsic to many of the great epics of the region. As is well known in the Mande world, bitter co-wife relations and rivalry (*fadenya*) between children by different mothers and the same father are central to one of the most celebrated oral epic traditions from the African continent, the story of Sunjata Keita, founder of the Mali empire in the 13th century, and his rise to power.

My approach to this topic is partly inspired by Lila Abu-Lughod’s work on “veiled sentiments” and women’s forms of resistance, such as song and folktales, to aspects of marriage and male dominance in Bedouin society (Abu-Lughod 1990, 2000). I argue that they are important because they express the “underneath of things” (to borrow a phrase from Mariane Ferme’s work on Mende women of Sierra Leone; Ferme 2001), providing a window on everyday life and thought in subtle and dialogical ways, which are not represented in the scant literature on women singers’ output.

As will be demonstrated, *ladilikan* themes and “voices” are not just “folklore” but have a real basis in fact; they confirm Burrill’s statement that marriage in



Figure 3: Kassé Mady Diabaté with daughter Hawa at a sumu, Bamako 2009

Mali occupies an “enduring centrality to social and political struggles” (Burrill 2015, 2).

The Status of Women in Marriage, Ladikilan and the “Double Voice”

Mali is, of course, famous for its vibrant music, with its many high-profile artists who perform around the world. The role of music in Mali as a key form of artistic and cultural expression and oral communication is widely acknowledged. Women singers have been prominent recording artists in Bamako since the decade before independence, with the generation of performers such as Fanta Damba, Hawa Dramé, Mogontafé Sacko, Penda Danté and Koni Koumaré. Women have largely dominated the domestic music scene since the demise of the dance orchestras that had been so popular in the 1970s. The opening of Mali television on September 22, 1983¹¹, followed soon afterwards by the introduction of the compact cassette into the region, have given both *jelimusow* and the *Wasulu kono* or “songbirds from Wasulu” an unprecedented public voice - although female vocalists have always been preferred in Mande culture where the singing voice is gendered as female (Durán 2000).

Ladilikan is an important and largely overlooked source of local thought and discourse on how marriage is perceived. Originally performed in a domestic setting, *ladilikan* songs now circulate through audio and video recordings and have become a vehicle for publically expressing otherwise hidden discourses. These songs engage with a broad number of issues including social relations, trust and betrayal, religion, work ethics, behaviour, health, children and most of all marriage, the main concern here. Their widespread popularity, despite (or because of?) their apparently contradictory and sometimes bombastic messages, as in *An Djera Tɛhela*, is noteworthy.

In her dissertation on women's associations in Bamako in the 1990s, Kate Modic describes songs that clearly belong to the *ladilikan* genre:

the popular music scene has changed the style of singing and the lyrics which some *jelimusow* currently sing. Rather than praise singing only, many have created songs related to popular issues. Yaye Kanoute, for example, sings "Jugu" (Enemy) about men who plan to take more than one wife. She said that men are "kalabaanci" (scoundrels)—a woman can see that the man will trick her and take another wife in his eyes, his walk, and his talk. Although Yaye is a *jeli*, that song, like other ones that she sings, does not praise individuals but is concerned with commenting on common problems in life. (1996, 40)¹²

Ladilikan is recognised by both singers and their audiences as a separate genre in itself. Nevertheless, elements of these texts can also be found in other musical genres such as the praise songs and historical narratives (*maanaw*) of the *jelis*. A well-known example of this is the song *Sara* by the celebrated singer Sira Mori Diabaté (Jansen 1996). Many of Sira Mori's well-known compositions such as *Sara* and *Kanimba* were essentially built around "words of advice" directed at women, using humour, metaphor, irony and parable.¹³

Ladilikan songs that reflect on issues around "sharing husbands" and co-wife relations almost invariably have some form of "double voice," that is, a dialogical strategy that opens the message to interpretation. A direct criticism of the institution of polygyny or *musucamantigiya* could be misconstrued as anti-Islamic and few women in Mali would dare to go as far as critiquing something that is condoned by the Quran. Instead, these songs often function as a form of covert protest or at very least, an expression of ambivalence.

As such, they mirror the views revealed in Whitehouse's insightful work on why polygamy remains so entrenched in Mali. His paper in this volume, aptly titled "The Trouble with Monogamy," surveys civil marriage records in Bamako to show that "among couples actually in a position to choose", four out of five opted for what he calls *de jure* polygamy even if they remained *de facto* monogamous. Seeking explanations for this discrepancy via discussion with focus groups in Bamako, Whitehouse discovers unexpected and contradictory opinions from both men and women. He finds that men prefer to sign for "polygamie" in the Town Hall so that at least in theory the option remains

open for them, as a kind of leverage over their wives; and that women agree to this, saying that sharing their husband with another wife, rather than with his girlfriends, is the lesser of two evils. Polygamy is thus seen as a cultural practice to be tolerated, even if the reality is highly problematic. Whitehouse quotes one woman in a group discussion saying

You can sign polygamy in the *mairie* [town hall] but no wife will accept the logic of polygamy, meaning for the husband to take other wives. So the husband will sign polygamy but stay with just one wife. That's what wives like. (Whitehouse 2017: 131–150)

He concludes that “[the] tension between these two seemingly dissonant attitudes helps explain the enduring practice of polygyny in this setting . . . [it] continues to shape choices, discourses and practices pertaining to marriage in Bamako to a degree that belies its diminishing prevalence” (ibid).

Women’s ambivalent attitudes towards polygyny are not exclusive to Mali; they are echoed in neighboring countries. Marame Gueye reports how Wolof women in Senegal take what she calls a “postmodern approach to polygamy”:

They do not see men as the center of their lives. . . . Rather, their children were the reason they stayed married. This is also a pattern that existed in pre-Islamic Wolof society, where women agreed to polygamy to provide a father and security for the children. This tendency continues to exist among Wolof women despite the materialism of many who want to be married to rich men, even if it means becoming the second or third wife. I call this return to traditional values a postmodern approach to polygamy. Women turn a disadvantageous situation to their own benefit.” (Gueye 2010, 164)

These kinds of dissonances are embedded in the expressive modes of *ladilikan*. The primary expressive medium, as with all Malian song, is of course the text, as in the proverb *dɔnkili man di, a kɔrɔ le ka di* (a song is not sweet, it is the meaning that is sweet). In *ladilikan*, the singer may switch from one side of the issue to another, appearing to condone the institution of polygamy, but commenting on the failure of husbands and wives to put its tenets into practice. Thus, s/he may first sing from the perspective of one co-wife and then – without signalling – change to that of the rival wife; or s/he might go from the words of the mother of the bride, to those of the bride herself. Because there is no signposting of this double voice, it is not always obvious that this is happening, leaving it up to the listener to interpret.

In towns and villages in the countryside in the Mande region (from Kita to Kela in the west of Mali) such songs are traditionally performed a capella, or with a simple instrumental accompaniment from a local acoustic instrument such as *ngoni* (lute), by female members of a bride’s family during marriage preparations. Even in the urban context, in Bamako, they continue to be widely performed at the many events that mark weddings. Mali’s popular singers like

Oumou Sangaré and Babani Koné also compose new songs of advice, keeping up to date with current discourses and musical trends.

Although the term “double voice” is mine, the singers with whom I have worked explain that imparting advice necessarily involves finding ways of presenting both sides of an argument so that the listeners can find ways of dealing with the realities they face. Therefore, it is not attributable to contemporary urban arrangement. This is, after all, the same culture that gave rise to the Koteba theatre tradition with which there may be some overlap. Claude Meillassoux, in his description of Bamako in the 1960s, comments that “the plays, though they always fall within the official party line, are bold attacks on ticklish problems, such as polygyny, forced marriage, caste prohibitions to marriage, abuses of Islam, or even criticism of the behavior of party officials (Meillassoux 1968, 72).

Ladilikan has some parallels in a Wolof tradition attacking polygamy known as *xaxar* which is, however, far more direct and obscene, as reported by Gueye. She describes *xaxar* as “a verbal fight between the senior wives and the newcomer, who is seen as disrupting the harmony of the household... [that is] performed before the bride enters her room” (Gueye 2010, 156). “During *xaxar*, women compose songs that denigrate and sometimes insult the other party. The senior wives’ intention is to discourage the new bride from joining them.” Gueye reports that the wives address the new co-wife implying that she wants to join the household because she sees gold, cars and a beautiful house, but they advise “this has been accomplished by vaginas, penises are capable of nothing”. (Gueye 2010, 155)

Singers of *ladilikan* look for ways of mediating the impact of their words, for example, through abstract and playful enactments in video clips. Videography is just one of the modern strategies that may be used to modify the song lyrics. Knowledge of the personal life styles and biographies of these divas also helps audiences to interpret their meanings, especially, as in the case with Babani Koné, if it is common knowledge that they have had an acrimonious separation from a husband.

As already mentioned, songs of advice about marriage are primarily directed at the bride telling her how to behave with her husband and his family in order to ensure a successful marriage and good children; and what to expect when sharing a husband. A related theme in *ladilikan* songs performed prior to a wedding is the warning that the good times of youth will soon be over, with words such as *diya ye banna* (sweetness is over).¹⁴ Young men and women must say goodbye to their childhood sweethearts; and brides must leave the protection of their parental home, to move in with their husband’s family and face new responsibilities and potential difficulties.

Other songs also advise on what to do when things go wrong in marriage. Divorce is to be avoided, but returning to the parental home is an option in extreme cases. A local hit by Babani Koné from 2004, entitled *Gnéwa Fa Bara*¹⁵

(I am going back to my father's house), adapts a traditional song from the Khasso region, in which there is a repeated refrain: *celasigi tɛ kɛ la nyɛgunun na*, "marriage cannot flourish under a disdainful gaze." It was released on her album *Yelema*¹⁶ (meaning "change") which at the time was considered radical by her Malian fans because the title *Yelema* was interpreted by some as incitement to women to divorce. The album also included a number of songs such as *Sontɛfo* about how wives are targeted by their husbands and in-laws for their "character flaws."

The promotional video clip of *Gnéwa Fa Bara* that was shown on Malian television at the time of the album release consisted of two scenes: first, Babani Koné looking glum in her husband's home, while he and his mother sucked their teeth and rolled their eyes in disgust at her cooking; second, Babani back at home with her own family, smiling and happy.¹⁷ She explained this song to me thus:

In Mande culture, women have to settle with the husband's family, and have to obey their husband and his family in everything. *Gnéwa Fa Bara* is a song about the competition that often arises between the daughter in law and her mother in law. The mother is jealous of her son's love for his wife. Age is power, so she uses this power to put pressure on the bride, to show that she's not behaving well, to be critical of her every move, to torment and undermine her with looks of disgust. This generally ends in a conflict, which takes place when the husband isn't there. Some mothers-in-law push things to such a point that the son is forced to divorce, and has to choose between the two.

So the bride says, 'I'm going home, because marriage can't work with this attitude.' Griots provide the voice for those who don't have the opportunity to speak. They express the voice of those women who suffer this ordeal. (Personal communication with author, 2006).

The notion of male dominance in gender ideology and marriage is cited frequently by both men and women as one of the most fundamental, and immutable aspects of Mande culture (Hoffman 2002). "A man has to be a woman's social superior or else he could not marry her" (Grosz-Ngate 1989, 171). Marriage is also decided by males (usually uncles of the bride or groom-to-be, not fathers). "Women are pawns in the game of marriage exchange between male communities... Marital relations are a men's business; whether or not the girl wants to get married remains an absolutely negligible factor in the matter" (Camara 1992, 59; my translation).

A legal manifestation of this ideology, relevant to this discussion, can be seen in the Malian Marriage and Family Code which requires women to "obey" their husbands. Resonating strongly with the new spirit of Independence, the Marriage Code was introduced in 1962 and was greeted with great enthusiasm by both men and women, particularly because of its legislation against forced or "purchased" marriage, whereby a family could pay an exorbitant amount of money in order to secure a bride¹⁸. For women in particular, it implied that they

would no longer be a commodity, “sold into slavery for the price of ten kola nuts,” as often articulated in traditional songs.

Bambo was first performed at a gala organized by Mali’s first president Modibo Keita in honour of a visit by several heads of state, in 1962, by a twelve-year-old *jelimuso* from Bamako, Fatoumata Kouyaté, and its refrain, *muso kera hɔɔɔn ye*, “women are now free” elicited gasps and cheers from the dignitaries (personal communication with author, Tata Bambo Kouyaté, 1989). Some of the lines say:

Bambo, kuma bɔra Kuluba,
 Bambo, kuma bɔra Mairie la
 Bambo, muso kera hɔɔɔn ye
 Bambo (the name of a girl), word came from the Presidential Palace
 Bambo, word came from the Town Hall
 Bambo, women are now free!

The song spread the message about the new legislation and had a considerable social impact. Indeed, shortly afterwards in the same year (1962), there was a case of a young woman from a prominent family in Bamako, who dared, at her own civil wedding ceremony, to say “No” when asked if she would “take this man as her husband”. Apparently, this was a direct result of *Bambo*, to the astonishment and scandal of the witnesses (Mamadou Konaté, personal communication with author, Bamako 2010). Several people who witnessed Tata Bambo singing this song in those early years under Modibo Keita’s presidency have told me that whenever she sang the line *Bambo, muso kera hɔɔɔn ye*, all the bachelors in the audiences cheered.¹⁹ Tata Bambo has remained one of Mali’s most popular female singers and continues to perform at wedding parties.

Bambo can be considered an early recorded example of the *ladilikan* genre. Burrill’s work on interconnections between married women and slavery during the colonial period helps to understand why this song would have made such an impact. “Concisely stated, many in the colonial administration regarded African wives as slaves – marriage was perceived as slave-like for women” (Burrill 2015, 77). (The historical correlation between wives and slaves is discussed further below). Recordings of *Bambo* are still frequently broadcast on Mali’s radio stations. Its strong association with Mali’s independence is demonstrated by the fact that Tata Bambo Kouyaté performed it in front of the President of Mali and his guests for the Cinquantenaire (50th anniversary) celebrations at the presidential palace in 2010.

Nevertheless, the Marriage Code of 1962 reinforces basic subservience of women to men, by specifying that “the wife must obey her husband” (Article 32), that the “husband is the head of the family” (Article 34) and the wife cannot engage in commerce or business without the consent of her husband (Article 38) (Ba Konaré 1993, 58–9).

The requirement for wives to “obey” their husbands has remained despite attempts to liberalize and give more rights to women. In 2009, under pressure from donor countries, the government attempted to modify Article 32 by stating that wives should “respect” rather than “obey” their husbands. The proposed change, hanging on a single word, was widely interpreted as an indication that women would be on an equal footing with men, and was fiercely opposed. A national rally of over 50,000 people, including thousands of women, packed the 26 Mars football stadium in Bamako in September 2009 to protest. The article was not endorsed.

Martin Vogl, the BBC correspondent for Mali at the time who reported on the demonstrations, said

It was one of the biggest public protests that Mali has seen for many years, and runs against the tradition that rarely sees Malians come on to the street to protest. What interested many observers especially those outside Mali was that so many women turned up to show their opposition to the family Code. After all, many women’s rights’ activists saw this code as something positive for women. One of the things that many Malians against the code were unhappy about was the fact that Western governments had been encouraging the Malian government to adopt the new code, the same Western governments that fund development in Mali, and this link was not lost on protestors, who had banners such as ‘Le Mali n’est pas à vendre’ (Mali is not for sale). (Martin Vogl, BBC correspondent in Mali, personal communication with author, 2011).

Tata Bambo’s final triumphant line “women are now free” is, in effect, the exact opposite of the phrase “the woman is a slave” in songs such as *Wulale*. More than fifty years later, both songs are still performed and their conflicting messages still considered relevant.

Ladilikan and the Culture of Sinaya in Mali: “The Woman is a Slave”

Women in Mali aspire to getting married in order to achieve status and have children in wedlock; indeed, marriage is seen as an “obligation”, as in the Bamana saying *furu ye wajibi ye* (marriage is an obligation). The fact that sooner or later, as Muslims, they may have to share their husbands with one or more co-wives is accepted by many as a fact of life. The Quran provides the framework for the institution of polygyny and for its local interpretation; c. 95% of Malians are Muslim and (according to a national survey published in 2006), two thirds of women aged 45–49 across the country are in a polygynous marriage (EDSM-IV 2006, 83). The Quranic basis for polygyny is that a man is permitted to take up to four wives, advising men to only undertake this if they can treat their wives equally (Surat 4, verse 129). The 1962 Marriage Code allows up to four wives, but

does not mention equality of treatment. Herein lies one of the main problems as perceived by Malian women and as enshrined in song.

There is a whole discourse that revolves around the notion of the *baramuso* (favorite wife, usually the junior; sometimes also called the *dunanmuso* or “stranger wife” because the most recent to join the household) and the *galomuso* (despised or unloved wife), usually the eldest or senior wife. Mande scholars will be familiar with the song (and epic) *Keme Burama*²⁰, which originally dates from the late 19th century and praises the warlord and Muslim cleric Almami Samory Touré (1830–1900), who built one of the last pre-colonial empires of the savannah region of West Africa. *Keme Burama* became the unofficial anthem for Guinea’s first president, Sekou Touré, in a version by the dance band Bembeya Jazz National, entitled “Regard sur le passé”, released on the Guinean state label Syliphone (Charry 2000, 285). It was also recorded by the great tenor singer, Sory Kandia Kouyaté, in a more traditional style, accompanied by the legendary kora player, Sidiki Diabaté (c. 1922–96), who was well-known for his knowledge of Mande history and of the Quran.

In 1986, on my first trip to Mali, I was hosted by the family of Sidiki Diabaté in Ntomikorobougou, in the west of Bamako. Early on in my visit, Sidiki – who was married to three wives – offered a description of how husbands typically favor one wife over others. To illustrate, he launched into an explanation of *Keme Burama*. The refrain of this celebrated piece from the *jeli* repertoire provides some insight into the power that a favored wife might have enjoyed in pre-colonial times. It praises Samory Touré as the husband of Saran, a Fulbe woman of great beauty who had been captured and enslaved by Touré during the ransacking of her village in Wasulu. Saran became Touré’s wife of preference (*baramuso*) on whom he bestowed all kinds of privileges:²¹

bumba-la-Saranke, la *kele* bara wara
 kore naani Saranke, la *kele* bara wara
 Sarankosi Saranke, *kele* bara wara
 Tanyerere Saranke *kele* bara wara
 The husband of “big-room” Saran, his war was great
 The husband of “four-herd” Saran, his war was great
 The husband of “beater” Saran, his war was great
 The husband of “take-everything” Saran, his war was great

Sidiki Diabaté (figure 4) explained the chorus thus:

Saran was the only one who was allowed to sleep in Samory’s own room (*bumba la Saran*); he gave her great wealth – she had a herd in each of the four corners of Kerewan (*kore naani Saran*); she was allowed to beat her co-wives mercilessly (*Sarankosi* – Saran the beater); and she could take whatever she wanted from her co-wives (*taa nyereye Saran*). (Personal communication with author, Bamako 1986)



Figure 4: Kora player Sidiki Diabaté with his youngest son, Madou Sidiki, Bamako 1986

These images conjure a woman who has risen from slave to favorite wife status who could do what she pleased, including beating her co-wives.

Many songs from the *ladilikan* repertoire contain the Bamanan phrase *muso ye jón ye* or its Maninka equivalent, *muso ye jón ne di* (meaning, “a woman is a slave”). In her book chapter “Contesting Slavery and Marriage in Early Colonial Sikasso,” Burrill remarks on the “interconnectedness of marriage and slavery

for many women in the early twentieth century. . . enslavement and wifely status and expectation were blurred categories of belonging” (Burrill 2015, 77). The many cases that she cites in this chapter parallel the story of Saran, taken as a slave-wife by Samory Touré and then becoming his favorite. Burrill’s work on this leaves little doubt that the statement that ten kola nuts, the ritual gift from a groom’s family to that of the bride, sell a woman into slavery, is rooted in historical fact.

For example, the song *Worotan* by Oumou Sangaré – a song she adapted from the tradition in Wasulu that has been her main inspiration - includes the following lines:

Young brides, be careful when you first go to your husband’s house
for everywhere there are traps laid to test you
dear young wives, once you are living with your husband’s family
do not touch the money that you see under the mattress when you are doing
housework
it’s there to test you
my dear little sister, once you are living with your husband
do not touch the milk at the back of the village hut without permission
all of this is there to test you
in your husband’s house, do not eat the meat from the cooking pot without
permission
it’s there to test you
marriage is a test of endurance because
the price of a mere ten kola nuts turns the bride into a slave²²

This last line often appears in many songs of advice about marriage -for example, in Kandia Kouyaté’s *Wulale* from her album *Kita Kan*. Although Kandia’s arrangement is not traditional, using orchestral strings, this minor-key melody is apparently adapted from the tradition of singing to the bride before she leaves the parental home²³. In another version of the same song in the early 1980s, the female vocalist, Mawa Kanté, is accompanied by Mali’s premier dance band of the 1970s, *Les Ambassadeurs Internationaux*, with some memorable solos on organ and electric guitar. It was the title track of an album of theirs, and the title itself - *Foudou - le mariage !?* – reflects, with its exclamation marks, a kind of double voice. She sings²⁴:

Ah wulajanyara, konyomuso wulajanyara,
Allah, muso ye jon ne di,
Kamasòrò k’i wa i cɛ so
Allah ka dunuya da, Allah ka furu da, Allah ka kanu da,
Ah, k’i ye jon ne di
Kamasòrò k’i ye wa i cɛ so

Far away, the bride is far away,
By God, woman is a slave

Because you're going to your husband's house
 God created the world, God created marriage, God created love
 Ah, you are a slave
 Because you go to live in your husband's house

Several Malian men have told me that listening to this song has a palliative effect on them, helping to heal marriage problems. A Malian professor living abroad remarked:

if I was getting on badly with my wife – a woman whom my family chose for me – my mother would sit me down and play a cassette of *Wulajanyara*. We'd listen together until we were both crying. It's a beautiful melody with sad lyrics. I would start to feel some compassion for my wife. And things would get better between us. (Personal communication with author, 2013)

Wulale in its diverse versions shows the duality of views that many Malian women especially in rural areas are presented with as they approach marriage, between what could be called the “voice of ideology” (the mother’s voice” – how the bride is expected to behave) and the “voice of protest” (the bride’s voice of anxiety), even though they are actually saying the same thing: that the woman is a slave.

Oumou Sangaré on Polygyny

Many of Mali’s female singers say that they have no quarrel with the institution of polygyny, since it is part of their religion and cultural heritage. What they object to is the inequality of the treatment of co-wives by their husbands and in-laws; saying that men are not capable of acting on what is written in Surat 4 verse 129 of the Quran.

This is the view of the well-known singer Oumou Sangaré, an outspoken opponent of polygyny, not just in her songs but in her public statements and actions. Her music draws primarily on that of her heritage, from the Wasulu region in southern Mali (figure 5), where singers like her are known as *kono* or “songbirds,” and are musicians by choice, not by lineage, unlike the *jelis* (Durán 1995, 2000). Oumou explains that they are called songbirds because “we are messengers who have a message. In Wasulu we sing for a reason, with a goal, either to advise people or to pass messages - not like the griots who sing praises.” (Personal communication with author, 1995).

In 2003 I conducted an extensive interview with Oumou over a period of three days. The purpose of this was to elicit her own voice for the liner notes of her CD *Oumou*, with her own comments on her songs and how they connect with her personal philosophy. Running the tape recorder for two to three hours every day, she was particularly verbal on the topic of polygamous marriage, which, she felt, could never be harmonious.



Figure 5: Oumou Sangaré (clapping to the rhythm), Wasulu, 2003

It was in my own home as a young child that I began to detest polygamy. It was the way my father had behaved with my mother that pushed me towards denouncing polygamy in my songs... Even among your children, it's hard not to choose a favorite... it's so difficult not to make choices. There's a *surat* [in the Quran] which says, if you see that you can't be equal with your wives then you shouldn't have more than one... Polygamy is false, ultra-false, it is sheer hypocrisy. The man who practices it will never be happy, he's obliged to be a hypocrite all the time. If you have two wives, you can't laugh openly in front of them, you can never relax. Once you have taken more than one wife, you become a prisoner of yourself. Because you will never be free. You have one wife who you love, you want to laugh and enjoy yourself with her, but you can't! The other is sitting just there. Why put two women under the same roof? The women are never happy, the children are even more unhappy, there's rivalry between them, whose mother is better and more loved? There will always be problems in a polygamous family. There are maybe only two out of one hundred polygamous families for whom it works, the rest are utterly miserable. So why not take only one wife?? At least when you're at home, you're happy and at ease. Whatever happens in your home, you are the only ones to know!!! You don't have a co-wife gloating over your arguments or miseries. (Durán 2003)

Many of Oumou's songs were learnt from her mother, taken from the Wasulu repertoire, for occasions such as the *sogoninkun* masked dancing (Durán 1995), as well as the *tègere tulon* (hand-clapping songs, mentioned above). Virtually all of her repertoire falls into the category of *ladilikan*.

Dorothea Schulz is one of the few scholars who has touched on the *ladilikan* repertoire (though she does not name it as such) and her discussion includes one song by Oumou Sangaré. Schulz sees *ladili* as form of “moral advice... often conveyed in reference to exemplary figures or by warnings.” She sees this mainly as part of the “praise songs” of the *jelimuso*.

A characteristic feature of the praise songs is that, as people put it, they ‘impart moral lessons’ (*ladili*). The ‘lessons’ reflect conventional ideas of gender relations, presenting the ideal woman as one who submits without hesitation to the will of her in-laws and endures unjust treatment with patience. They promise women that their children’s success will be their recompense for compliance with moral conventions because a woman’s obedience and patience will be reflected in her children’s’ exemplary moral disposition. (Schulz 2001, 349)

I would argue that this is a rather one-dimensional understanding of *ladilikan* songs, failing to note their ambiguities and double voices.

Schulz’ analysis focuses on three popular songs from the mid 1990s and their representations in video clips, which she watches with a group of women from different ages and backgrounds to elicit their reactions. She is “puzzled” to find that these women

unanimously emphasised that the songs told them ‘how to behave well’ and encouraged them to overcome the difficulties of everyday life. These explanations are puzzling, given that the songs exhort female patience, submission and obedience, conduct that the same women who emphasised how much they appreciated the ‘moral lessons’ refused to follow in other situations. (ibid, 352)

Schulz frames her analysis in what she sees as the “general tendency to ‘feminise’ moral corruption and cultural authenticity,” contrasting the representation of rural versus urban femininity and notes that all three songs reflect the “Janus face of urban life” and its moral ambivalences. However, she remarks that their “primary *raison d’être* is distraction, not instruction” (ibid, 355), which contradicts the testimony presented in this article about the impact of such songs. She notes ambivalence but not the use of double voice, and she does not comment on co-wife tensions.

Two of the three pieces she analyses are performed by popular *jelimuso* of the time. One is a version of *Mamaya*, recorded by Nainy Diabaté. *Mamaya* is a *sui generis* piece from Kankan in the 1940s; it is rooted in a particular historical moment and cannot be considered *ladilikan*.²⁵ The third song, *Bi Furu* (translated as “Modern Marriage” on the album) by Oumou Sangaré is the only one that belongs to the *ladilikan* genre. *Bi Furu* voices a young bride-to-be’s concern that she has not been trained in the tasks that are expected of her as a wife, and then goes on to critique various aspects of “modern marriage” including its emphasis on material wealth.

Oumou herself explained to me that she composed *Bi Furu* after she married in 1992 and had gained some personal experience of being a wife. *Bi Furu* was

the title track of her second album released in Mali (the album was released abroad under the title *Ko Sira*). This was at the height of her ascendancy to popularity in her own country, and the beginning of her international success. It also heralded the era of video clips of songs for Mali television. Like most of Oumou's video clips of the early 1990s, *Bi Furu* was directed by Malian television producer Kolly Keita, who set the local trend for a creative *mise en scene* of song lyrics.

Schulz focuses her discussion on the video clip of *Bi Furu*, which depicts a bride (played by Oumou) as she is prepared for the journey to settle in her husband's house (*celasigi*). The group with whom Schulz watched the video commented primarily on what they saw as the "moral decline" of the bride:

the 'moral lesson' that many women 'detected' in Oumou Sangaré's song clearly resonates with the contrast they themselves establish between the morally superior and 'authentic' life style of rural women and its counterpart, the materialist orientation of urban women. (ibid, 364).

Oumou's own "reading" of what her song portrays is broader.

It was a big hit here because I explained exactly what happens when a young girl gets married, from the time of her betrothal, through to the wedding, her problems with the parents-in-law, how she has to marry a much older man, who already has wives... I told the story as it really is and people were astonished to hear the truth. (Durán 2003).

Bi Furu's musical arrangement, as in all Oumou's music of the 1990s, does indeed evoke the countryside and "authenticity," with its use of Wasulu rhythms and iconic instruments like the youth harp *kamalengoni*. The device of dialogue between male and female chorus is one way in which she evokes a "double voice," a musical device used by other artists as well.

Oumou Sangaré's song *Tiebaw*²⁶ from her 1996 album *Worotan*, (meaning "Ten Kola Nuts" – the ritual gift from the groom's family to that of the bride to cement the marriage) addresses the topic of *baramuso* and *galomuso* with a light-hearted musical arrangement that belies its deep message. *Cɛba* means "big man" and is an ironic reference to the men who consider themselves "big shots." As with many of her songs she uses irony and onomatopoeic emphatic syllables to mock the husband's sentiments of delight and distaste.

When a man marries,
He delights in the company of a new wife (*kiri-kiri*)
But with his first wife, he looks glum (*firi-ti-pi*)
New clothes are bought for the favored wife
Old clothes are passed on to the least favored
The least loved wife is always the worst dressed
The best loved always looks stylish
The good meat from the market goes to the favored wife

The unpopular wife makes do with the dried fish
 The stew made from dried fish is always tasteless
 While the meat stew of the beloved is always delicious
 The unloved wife can do no right
 While his favorite can do no wrong
 Oh women, don't let your husband's behavior upset you
 God is witness to us all.²⁷

Another of Oumou Sangaré's repertoire from the 1990s that portrays vividly her disparaging views on polygamy is *Dougou Kamalemba*²⁸ (translated on the album as "the Womanizer") from her CD *Ko Sira*, released in 1993. This song, originally drawn from the Wasulu tradition²⁹ was renamed *Kamelemba* and reworked into a new, electronic version for her latest (2017) album *Mogoya*, with a futuristic video shot in an urban setting, but the lyrics remain the same.³⁰ During our extended interview in 2003, Oumou explained to me that this song was about how "often the men who take more than one wife are womanizers. They try to seduce anything with a skirt. This was my first real open criticism of polygamy." (Durán 2003) The chorus, *Ka ne negen, ka ne negen, ka ne lanyina, dugukamalemba ye mogo negen na* was translated thus: "He entices me, he tries to seduce me, to the point where I forget everything except for him, oh the womanizer has the art of seduction!" She then went on to give a broader view of what she intended with this song, which is adapted from traditional Wasulu repertoire.

Oh the youth of Mali, Oumou Sangare is greeting you. Listen hard to what I have to say, be careful of the skirt chaser, they'll marry you with all the sweet words of the world. The first wife is usually from within the extended family so he'll say to you, you are my sister! Even if I marry a second wife, you're the best because we're equal, we're of the same blood. Then he brings a second wife into the home, and he says to her, you're my favorite, why? You will make me beautiful children. The first one, she was given to me by my family, but you are my own choice. Then he marries a third, and to her he says, you are the lucky one in this household. The first wife was forced upon me, the second just happened like that, but you are the real one I want. So the third wife is full of herself, thinking she's the favorite. So now there are three wives at home. Then he marries a fourth, and to her he says, you are the very very last, and the best. The others are old, you are the youngest, that's it, now I will never marry again! Of course this is true, since he can only have four wives. So this one too, she thinks she's the loved one. Then all four wives bicker with each other, and each one boasts of what the husband has told them. The womanizer always has fights at home among the wives. (Durán 2003)

Men, *Ladilikan* and Co-Wife Violence

Do men also perform *ladilikan* songs? In Heather Maxwell's dissertation on wassoulou³¹ music in Bamako, she addresses this topic briefly.

these songs are interesting because they provide insight into what women tell each other about marriage, but I was curious about what men tell men. After about the third song they translated for me, I realized that all the songs were about how the young bride should behave, how she should avoid doing this, avoid doing that. I asked them about songs for the men's celebrations. 'Do singers tell men so many things about how they should behave in order to be a good husband?' A look of shocked surprise spread across the room, then they all burst into laughter. So taken by the comic nature of my question, they did not even try to respond at first. Then when I pushed them they said 'well now... not really, We're men! We don't have to change anything. That's the woman's job' (Maxwell 2001, 120–21)

Nevertheless, there are some songs from the tradition that act as advice to men, for instance by telling them to treat their new brides with respect, as in *Disa Walen* ("the headscarf has left"), which comes from the region around Kela in the southwest. The *disa* is a white headscarf worn by elder women, and in this song, it represents the young bride, because she is always close to her mother and godmothers, like their headscarves. As the bride approaches the house of her husband, the bride's family and godmothers (*dembaw*) sing this to warn the new in-laws to treat their bride with respect; she is unsullied and innocent. "We agreed to give her to you" they sing. "She's like a pure white headscarf. Don't mistreat your new bride, or use her like a slave, or let her suffer, as if you don't know her origins. Don't sully or humiliate her, her character is pure, she is innocent"³²

Male vocalists also include *ladilikan* in their repertoire, with advice directed at both men and women (again this can be seen as a form of "double voice"). The revered *jeli* singer from Segou, Abdoulaye Diabaté is particularly admired for his gift with words in conveying advice, and his fans quote this as the reason for his enduring popularity. For example, his song *Bi Maaw* (people of today) from his 1995 album *Djiriyo*, critiques people for their superficiality and materialism, always wanting new things. The lyrics begin with a general statement, but it is clear from the start that he is talking about men who take many wives and women who divorce and remarry.

A-ye, bi maaw kokura tigi
 fen min be kɔrɔlen mangoya, a n'a s'am bee ma kelen-kelen
 people of today are into new things
 whatever we don't like about old things, that will happen to us too, one by one

He goes on to sing *mɔgɔ si kana n daa dun furu ko la, manamana ko ye furu ye* – which could be translated as "don't get me talking about the topic of marriage; marriage has become a mockery". Co-wives' problems, the lyrics say, are due to men who make one woman un-loved while the other is their favorite - she can have what she wants. Then a male chorus sings: "when we start a new thing, there's no mistaking! men will get so excited, they'll put their trousers on inside out, their shirt will go on inside out, they put the right shoe on the

left foot.” This is typical of Abdoulaye Diabaté’s use of humor to highlight the flaws of human nature; everyone recognizes themselves in lines like these. The lyrics are played out in the video with a war of words and gestures between a male and female chorus standing on opposite sides of a mud-brick wall. There is also a brief clip of young girls performing the *tɛgɛɛ tulon*, the handclapping songs which Abdoulaye always cites as a major source of inspiration.³³

Women are not spared in Abdoulaye’s songs, but men receive the brunt of his criticism. When I asked Abdoulaye about what he intended to show in the song, he replied:

Marriage has become materialistic, people are only interested in the superficial aspect of marriage. Even the godmothers, who are there to look after the interests of the bride, are more concerned with how much money the husband has than with the bride’s welfare. I don’t question polygamy, I question the attitudes of men who are ready to divorce or take a second wife as soon as they’re bored with the first one. And women too – they divorce so easily now. Love is like a fishing game. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. But you have to say these things with a smile on your face. (personal communication with author, Bamako, 2006).

These songs poke light fun at marriage and polygyny, but there is also a serious content. Malian women I have spoken to tell many stories of having been bewitched, having spells put on them, even poisoned and physically attacked by their co-wives. One male musician told me that he and his wife had opted for polygamy at their civil wedding. But when he wanted to take a second wife, his first wife threatened to kill herself and he had to abandon the idea. He was also fearful for his own life. “If you marry a rich man and he takes another wife, the first wife will try *maraboutage* on him. He may even be afraid of drinking water in his own house! Co-wives will stop at nothing” was his comment.

Some of these accusations are substantiated in reality. The *jelimuso* Kandia Kouyaté, widely acknowledged as one of Mali’s greatest singers of the late 20th century, had a personal experience of co-wife violence that gives her song *San Barana* special poignancy. *San Barana* is the opening track of her album *Biriko*, and is apparently based on a traditional piece from her home town, Kita. After Kandia’s first husband died, she was re-married to a man of blacksmith lineage, becoming his third wife (which in effect, made her junior and therefore the *baramuso* or favored wife). Co-wives take turns to spend time with their husbands; usually two days at a time.³⁴ In this case each of the three co-wives had their own house, with Kandia’s being the most lavish, since she was well-off in her own right as a successful singer. One day, when it was Kandia’s turn to be with her husband, as they sat together in her living room, the second co-wife burst in unannounced, and attacked Kandia with a razor blade, cutting down her chest with a long and deep gash. This incident was widely reported at the time in the local press, and the scar can be seen in photographs of her. Kandia recovered, but the wound was serious and it left its toll.

In 1998, not long after this event, I went to interview Kandia in Paris, while she was recording her album *Kita Kan* (“the voice of Kita”) for the French label Syllart (figure 6). Kandia is an educated woman, used to running her own musical ensemble and to having a certain amount of professional freedom as an artist. One of my questions was about her views on polygamy. In a dramatic gesture, in the recording studio, she pulled aside the top of her boubou to expose the giant scar running down her chest, exclaiming “this is polygamy!”



Figure 6: Kandia Kouyaté while recording album *Kita Kan*, Paris, 1998

Despite this life-threatening attack, Kandia refused to take her co-wife to justice. But her frightening experience is reflected in the lyrics to her song *San Barana* (“the rain has come”). Once again, rather than objecting to polygamy, it asks why women allow themselves to become a second, third or fourth wife, if they cannot deal with the situation? She cites all the problems that can arise from co-wife bickering. The music is somber, slow and in a minor key, with acoustic guitar accompaniment.

Tururo terenende
 Nya ka kuo dɔ ye
 Ne dun nya man deli k'o ye,
 Ntulu ka kumo dɔ men
 Ne dun tulu ma deli k'o men
 Sina kasi na la ke kuo fo - o ye kasiba ye
 Wuya, wuya la le nalu, san barana ah ye
 N'a ma nya kele sigi kò, ndɔgɔ muɲu yo (ye)
 Sinamusomalu ka lun-o-lun kele, a be furuke si dɔgɔya
 Sinamusomalu ka ke-ko kele be wuludenw jigi bo ɲɔgɔna
 An wolola, k'an' mbalimalu to olu sonna sinaya ma
 An wolola le, k'an mbalimalu soro olu benna sinaya ro
 Sinamusomalu ka lun-o-lun kele, a be furuke si dɔgɔya
 Ah mbalima musolakalu, an ka ben
 Ah mbalima musolakalu an k'an bolo di ɲɔgɔn ma
 N'an n'yan mbolo di ɲɔgɔn ma, o be furu son jigiya ro
 Mun' ye alu, san bara fin
 San finna kabako san, san finna
 San finna, ɲɔgɔn-tinye-san finna
 Ndògò le, n'a ma nya kele sigi ko, fo i ka muɲu so
 Musolu la benbaliya mbalimacelu,
 Sinnamusomalu ka benbaliya mbalimacelu a y'a korosi o
 Wuya, wuya la le la, san barana a ye

TRANSLATION³⁵

Tururo terenende [the sound of someone pacing up and down]
 my eyes have seen something
 that my eyes are not used to see
 my ears have heard words
 that my ears are not used to hearing -
 co-wives crying about the fact of being a co-wife – that is serious weeping.
 Oh, my mothers, the rain is here
 if you cannot live with fighting, my little sister, then be patient
 constant fighting between co-wives will reduce the life span of a husband
 Fights between co-wives over the husband creates mistrust amongst the children
 when we were born, we found that our ancestors had accepted polygyny.
 We women should get together
 women, let's join hands

if we join hands, it will give trust to marriage
 what's the matter with you, it's going to downpour
 the rain is coming, strange rain, the rain is coming
 the rain is coming, a rain that is going to make us destroy one another
 if you must live in a fighting household, you will have to be patient
 misunderstanding between co-wives, my male friends,
 misunderstanding between co-wives, watch out for this, my male friends!
 the rain is here

The late Balla Konaré, a teacher and English language translator living in Bamako helped me to translate and understand the lyrics of this song. He commented

This is useful advice. In modern times, if men don't stop marrying several wives, their lives are at stake. *Nɔɔn-tɪnye-san* – that means, rain which is useless, which just destroys - a terrible metaphor! rain is good! so should marriage be! Because of despair, the co-wives try to destroy everything. If two women are fighting over a man, he can be destroyed through their strategies. (Personal communication with author, 2006)

Where is the double voice in *San Barana*? Balla pointed out that the song subtly directs its advice at both men and women, and hints at the dysfunctionality of polygynous relationships, without actually critiquing polygyny itself.

The Double Voice in the 21st Century

There has been a clear trend in Malian song from the mid 1990s onwards towards more explicit language and direct criticism of the behavior of both men and women in polygynous marriage, with a large number of song titles like *Bi Furu* (marriage today), *Sinaya* (co-wife relations) and *Sinamuso* (co-wives). The *jelimuso* Yayi Kanouté was one of the artists who set a trend for strong language with her popular hit *Djugu Magni* (Enemies are Bad). She refers to men as the “enemy” (*jugu*) and a “liar” (*kalabaanci*). “If I say that enemies are bad, I'll tell you why. If a man finds a new woman, one can tell that straight away in the way he dresses and walks. The first wife, whatever she says, he doesn't like it. She can't put a foot right.” The song made Yayi Kanouté one of the most sought-after singers in Mali during the mid 1990s. It was later released on compilation entitled “*Divas of Mali*” by a prestigious American record company.³⁶

Another *ladilikan* song that uses strong language and a double voice was *Baramuso* by the *jelimuso* Nene Sarama Diabaté. She begins by taking the voice of the favorite wife who can do and say what she pleases and has the run of the household – a kind of modern day *Saran* (of the *Keme Burama* song, quoted above).

Bara le ne di
Ne tɪɲɛlen don

Bara le ne di
 Ne yadalen don
 I man n'kenya ye?
 Ne man kuma cogo don
 Ne tijelen don

I am the favorite
 I am spoilt
 I am the favorite
 I'm full of myself
 Don't you see how I am?
 I say anything I like
 I'm spoilt

The text then switches without signaling to another “voice”, comparing men to chameleons (*Cè ye nònsi ye*) and calls them “two-wife talkers” (*muso-fula barobaga*),

A man is a chameleon; he takes up to four wives
 One becomes his favorite; the other is despised.
 Men are capable of anything.
 get out of my room, ‘two-wife talker’
 today you’re here, tomorrow you’re there ³⁷

Bah Kouyaté, another popular *jelimuso* of the 21st century, has recorded a multitude of songs critiquing polygyny and the infidelity of men, such as her song *Bicélu* (Today’s Men) in which she accuses them of being two-faced liars - “this is advice (*ladilikan*),” she sings, “it’s not a bad thing.”³⁸ Bah Kouyaté lives in Bamako and has toured the world with some of Mali’s best known stars such as Toumani Diabaté and Salif Keita.³⁹ Her song *Sinamoussoko*⁴⁰ (co-wife business) illustrates the double voice strategies and mocking imagery already discussed in this article. Backed by a fast-tempo dance beat and synthesizers, she first adopts the voice of a woman who learns, via a friend, that her husband has taken a second wife. *Ne tun ka bara!* (I was shocked!) She sings “I don’t want a co-wife - the thought of a co-wife makes me weep.”

The video clip portrays her husband sitting down and holding prayer beads, while he flirts with his new co-wife. The friend who has happened to come across them together rolls her eyes in disgust. Soon after we see the singer playfully punching her husband on the chin, with a smile on her face. She then launches into a rant about what she would do to her co-wife, which she acts out to camera in the video: slash an eye out; cut a leg off; make her drink acid... At this point in the music, a chorus responds with “eh..?” which is a comment to show that this kind of behavior is going too far.

In the next part of the song she makes fun of the co-wife, whom she accuses of having skinny legs, a big mouth, big nose and stick-out ears, all done with mimed gestures and a smile on her face. (This echoes Babani Koné’s use of

the word “donkey” to describe her co-wife.) “What woman would accept this?” asks Bah Kouyaté in the song. But her last lines change approach completely. Now, she appeals to women to remember that polygyny is an old practice, and she suggests that jealousy can be positive if controlled.

*Muso folo folo, keleya ka di,
am bi muso, an ka keleya ka cɛ mine ka to i kelen bolo.
N'a tora i kelen bolo bɛmbaliya ka na
Keleya ka nyin, nengoya man nyi, hasidiya man nyi
a la juguya ka n siran*

In former times, women would be jealous but they would help their husbands
Today's wives, we fight to have our husbands to ourselves
but if you keep your husband for yourself, misunderstandings will begin
jealousy is good but selfishness is not.
Its evilness scares me

Discussing this song with the singer Hawa Kassé Mady Diabaté and her accompanist the balafon player Lassana Diabaté (figure 7), the following exchange took place:



Figure 7: Lassana Diabaté with balafon, Bamako 2010

Lassana: “this is a contradictory song!! She begins by saying that she would like to cut the woman’s leg off and make her drink acid, but ends up saying that jealousy is healthy, women should not be egoistic or expect the husband to be just for her. They need to share the husband.”

Hawa Kassé Mady: “it’s a double voice. She takes the voice of ‘today’s woman’ who threatens violence, either direct or via maraboutage, to both her husband and the co-wife.”

Lassana: “Ah! But some people like me will not understand unless it’s explained to them, and they will see it as incitement to violence. Jealousy between co-wives used to be positive. They would strive to be better than the other, more beautiful, better dressed, and the husband would be proud. Now, it’s turned into violence...” (conversation with author, 2016).

An Djera Tchela

I now return to the song with which this article begins, *An Djera Tchela*. The lyrics are both explicit, and difficult to understand.

Chorus: *manasali ye, o ye manasali ye*

Solo: *An jera cela, o kuma nin ye tonya ye nka bèè dama ka kan, o ye manasali ye.*

An jera cela, kalo saba kundigibalilu (chorus: *manasali ye*)

An jera cela, kalo saba yɔɔɔfuranbali “ “

An jera cela, kalo saba tobilikebali “ “

An ta so dankele yo, sani fali ka na an ka dɔni kɛ!

We share a husband, it’s true, but to say that we are equal? ... this is drivel
a woman who does not change hairstyle for three months
a woman who does not clean the house for three months
a woman who does not cook for three months
let us go home (so-and-so), to get something accomplished before the donkey
returns

What is the word *manasali*? The word does not appear in a Bamanan dictionary, and several Malians I consulted were unable to explain it. Babani herself said that with the first two lines, she was actually just saying “yes we share a husband, but who could say that we are equal? I am the better wife” (personal communication with author, 2016). A comment on the YouTube site of the official video clip, posted by a woman by the name of Fatouma Dembele, echoes Babani’s explanation. She says: “It’s true that we share a husband. But, to say that we are seen as equal by this same husband is just drivel. That is, *manassaliyé* which means to speak without actually saying anything. In my opinion, she is provoking her co-wife or wives.”⁴¹

The meaning of the final line is also open to interpretation. Some Malians I talked to thought this was an invitation for the husband to return home to

share an intimate moment with the singer while the “donkey” was out; others thought it meant that as the “better” spouse, she invites a friend (whose name she chooses not to mention) to join her in household chores. There is both humour and ambivalence in this text; the co-wife whose somewhat self-righteous voice Babani takes is nevertheless not ashamed to openly insult the other and to boast of her own superiority. The official video clip stays completely clear of any theatrical enactment of the lyrics, instead it features Babani singing with her ensemble and dancing with a group of women in a traditional setting.

Babani Koné is a star whose personal life is colorful and very much in the public eye. At a performance with her semi-acoustic band at the Festival on the Niger, in Segou, 2006, at which I was present, Babani sang some of the tracks from her recently released album *Yelema* (“change”), which was a best-seller on the local market at the time. One of these, *Ma Vie a Changée*, a western-style ballad about how finding love has changed her life, sung in both French and Bamanan, created a roar of excitement from the 15,000-strong mainly Malian audience.

Ma Vie a Changée is just one of Babani’s more daring songs, composed with little reference to the *jeli* tradition, featuring an acoustic guitar with echoes of Country & Western music. Most of the audience knew that the song was in some way autobiographical - Babani had been through a much-reported divorce, had then had a tumultuous relationship with a wealthy businessman, and then married another (from whom she has subsequently divorced). The option of “change” is not usually available to most Malian women, for reasons stated by Whitehead (this volume) and women are certainly not supposed to initiate divorce from their husbands or to pick and choose their partners. Babani is admired by many female fans precisely because she dared to defy such norms, but she is also severely criticised by some men for precisely the same reason. Yet she knows how to assuage her critics.

The following day, Babani held a press conference at the festival. Some twenty Malian journalists were there, all eager to get quotes from the star, and their questions focused on what they saw as her confrontational lyrics.

“Are you inciting our wives to divorce,” one man asked, “when you sing about change in your life?”⁴²

Another journalist said “in your song *Gnéwa Fa Bara*, you advise women to ‘go home’ to their father’s house, if they think they’re being ill-treated by their in-laws. Isn’t that encouraging women to leave their husbands?”

“Certainly not”, replied Babani, “what I am saying is the opposite – if you treat a married woman with respect, she too will treat you with the greatest respect. This is my advice to both the husband and the wife.” She then pointed out that *Gnéwa Fa Bara* – meaning, “I am going home to my father’s house” - is a traditional Maninka song from the Kayes region, and she added a poignant remark: “I didn’t make up these words; they were here before I existed! Were our ancestors inciting to divorce?”

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the *ladilikan* genre as an under-reported but important mode of communication between Mali's female artists and their audiences, particularly used to advise on the tricky issues of relations between co-wives, a relationship imbued with rivalry which is encapsulated in the Bamana term *sinaya*. It has shown that *ladilikan* songs come from an old oral tradition in southern Mali which lends them a level of authority; they have been co-opted since independence mainly by female singers to comment on issues around gender ideology and marriage.

A crucial feature of *ladilikan* is an artifice which I refer to as the "double voice," as a way of avoiding direct criticism of polygyny itself, while pointing out its inherent flaws. Some recent *ladilikan* songs, such as *Sinamoussoko* and *An Djera Tchela*, are peppered with the kinds of rude names and even threats that co-wives think about saying, but would not actually dare to do, though there are cases of violence, as shown here. These are enacted in video clips with playfulness, using a voice of irony or a humorous video clip which the singers believe help to let off steam when "sharing a husband," much the way Koteba theatre works. There is room for misunderstanding as well, as evidenced in the reaction to *Sinamoussoko* by one listener. Further audience research would no doubt reveal much more about the ways that this repertoire functions and why it remains so popular.

Either way, *ladilikan* song comments on uncomfortable issues otherwise not aired in public, while the thousands of women who buy these songs and listen to them on radio and television and at wedding parties are engaging in a form of active participation even in their silence. The analysis of *ladilikan* songs supports the findings of both Whitehouse and Burrill in their research on marriage, polygyny and the status of women in Mali from the colonial period onwards. These songs with their double voices demonstrate vividly the kinds of ambivalent feelings that, as noted by Whitehouse, have kept polygyny as an ongoing social institution even in 21st century urban Mali.

NOTES

1 The spelling of the song title is copied from the album released in Mali, and uses a version of French/colonial orthography: *An Djera Tchela*. Using the current DNAFLA orthographic system for Bamanan, it would be *An Jera Cɛla*. I have quoted the orthography for song titles as they have been printed on the cassette or album sleeve, and provided DNAFLA spellings in footnotes. Personal names are written here using their official spelling.

2 Rather than a direct translation of the first two lines of the song, it is an explanation, as provided by Babani Koné (personal communication with author, 2016). See the end of the article for more discussion of the song text and its meanings, especially the term "manasaliye". *Baliverne* is how one person translates it into French. The choice of "drivel" is mine.

3 Wilfred Willy Abdoul, former head of the Malian association in the UK, personal communication with author, 2017

4 Dorothea Schulz translates the verb *ka ladili* as to “‘educate’ in the sense of giving moral advice” (Schulz 2001, 349).

5 See Sory Camara’s *Gens de la Parole: Essai sur la Condition et le Rôle des Griots dans la Société Malinke*. Paris: Karthala (1992; second edition, reprinted from 1975), 114 for a brief description of the *tegere tulon* songs. This is one of the few mentions I have found of this important repertoire, which is performed by young girls in the villages of the Mande region of Mali.

6 All translations into English of song lyrics cited in this article are my own, unless otherwise stated

7 DNAFLA spelling: *Sanu jala*

8 I have witnessed this on many occasions

9 The predominance of female audiences for music programmes on Mali television is also remarked by Schulz who observes that “in 1992, when I started attending these concerts on a regular basis, I was struck by the observation that up to 85 per cent of the audience consisted of women” (Schulz 2001, 352).

10 The dance and the mouthing of the lyrics by the Top Etoiles audience, who were almost exclusively female, can be seen at c.2”25 into a YouTube clip, accessed 12 August 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n457HlZwilc>

11 Not in 1985 as asserted by Schulz 2001, 349. See Hoffman 2012, 134–36 for an analysis of Malian television and its role in giving women singers a platform in the 1980s.

12 See also more discussion of this song by Yayi Kanouté [correct spelling] later on in this paper. The title as on the cassette was *Djugu Magni* [Enemies are Bad].

13 See for instance a version of Sira Mori Diabaté’s song *Kanimba* on the album *Ladilikan*, featuring arrangements of the Malian “Trio Da Kali”, in collaboration with the San Francisco string quartet Kronos Quartet. *Kanimba* was brought to the collaboration by the Trio’s singer, Hawa Kassé Mady Diabaté, great niece of the song’s composer, Sira Mori Diabaté. I was the music producer for this album but the decision to use *Ladilikan* as the title was made by the record company without any input from me. Released in 2017 on World Circuit Records ECD093.

14 An example is the traditional Maninka song, *Kuruninkun* which has a similar role to Oumou Sangaré’s song, *Sigikuruni*, the little marriage stool). for a version of *Kuruninkun* sung by *jelis* of Kela, with French subtitles to the words, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJtZyUiwpnQ>

15 DNAFLA spelling: *Ne wa m fa bara*

16 DNAFLA spelling: *Yelema*

17 This promotional video clip seems to have been removed from YouTube.

18 see Burrill 2015, 61–66 for more discussion of bridewealth in Malian marriage

19 I have heard this comment from several men who remember Tata Bambo’s performances in the 1960s. Unfortunately I have not found any archive footage of her from that period.

20 For discussion of whether the story of Samory Toure can be considered an epic, see Conrad 2008

21 These can be heard at 1"52 into the recording of *Keme Bourema* by Sory Kandia Kouyaté featuring Sidiki Diabaté's kora playing. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxezzVNbQFI> (accessed 9 August 2017).

22 This is the official translation as published on the sleeve notes to the album *Worotan*, Oumou Sangaré's album released in 1996, World Circuit Records WCD045.

23 I have seen this song performed acapella at private wedding celebrations in Bamako and have been told by several *jelimusow* that it is traditional in origin.

24 Kandia Kouyaté's *Wulale* (also known as *Wulajanyara*) is a version of a well-known song, released in 1999 on her album *Kita Kan*, Sterns CD 1088. *Foudou, le mariage !?* is the title track of an LP released on Maikano Mai LPS 1040. <http://www.radioafrica.com.au/Discographies/Ambassadeurs.html> [accessed on 12 August 2017]

25 For more details on *Mamaya* and its text and meanings, see Lansiné Kaba and Eric Charry, "Mamaya: Renewal and Tradition in Maninka Music of Kankan, Guinea (1935–45)" in Ingrid Monson (ed.) *The African Diaspora: a Musical Perspective* (New York and London: Garland 2000), 187–206.

26 DNAFLA spelling: *Cebaw*, plural of *ceba*.

27 Lyrics translated by Australian based musician Moussa Diakite as subtitles for a live performance by Oumou Sangaré in Bamako, from a documentary on Oumou Sangaré broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1997 in their Foreign Correspondent strand. *Tiebaw* was originally released on the album *Worotan*, World Circuit Records WCD045.

28 DNAFLA spelling *Dugu Kamalemba*.

29 An almost identical song with the same chorus was recorded in 1994 by the late, celebrated Wasulu artist Coumba Sidibé on her album *Djandjonba*, recorded in New York but released in Paris by Camara Productions. The track is entitled *Pouikanpoui*.

30 The video can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4eXmjhuDb8> [accessed 14 August 2017] (*Mogoya* No Format NOF 36). The DNAFLA spelling of the album title would be *Mɔgɔya*.

31 I use the spelling *wassoulou* for the style of music, in accordance with how the word is spelt on local cassettes; however, the geographical region from which it originates is spelt in DNAFLA, *Wasulu*. See Durán 1995 for further details.

32 The source for this information is the family of Kassé Mady Diabaté from Kela. His daughter, Hawa Kassé Mady Diabaté, remembers singing *Disa Walen* when she grew up in Kela and Kangaba. She is the singer in Trio Da Kali, a group that I have been working with since 2012. The song is on their eponymous album, released by World Circuit Records WCD085EP in 2015.

33 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYGEbwNq7AQ> accessed on 16 August 2017.

34 See for example Hoffman's description of the televised Malian drama series "Dou", and the competition between and characterization of the co-wives in the series (Hoffman 2014, 138).

35 Translation from Maninka lyrics by Balla Konaré.

36 DNAFLA spelling: *Jugu man nyi*. The track was originally released on a local cassette by the Paris based CK7 Camara Production, and reissued in 1996 on a

compilation called “Divas of Mali: great vocal performances from a fabled land” (Shanachie 64078).

37 This second verse is quoted from my fieldnotes, 1997. Unfortunately I did not write down the full lyrics in Bamanan, and have since lost the original cassette that had the song.

38 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEQp-ZnYTn4> [accessed 14 August 2017]. The reference to *ladilikan* can be heard at 39” into the clip.

39 Bah Kouyaté can be seen with Salif Keita on several video clips, including one where he visits Grand Bassam, Cote d’Ivoire and sings for the President, Alassane Ouattara <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CazABRhpbIE> [accessed 14 August 2017]

40 DNAFLA spelling Sinamusoko. The video clip can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Usko5gmlpYU> [accessed 14 August 2017]

41 This is a comment posted on the official video of An Djera Tchela, dated 2011. The original is in French; the French term she uses for *manasaliye* is “baliverne”. My translation. The video can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vVHtjLITQ&lc=z23zs5lpny22trptmacdp432lj5yyrbnlhnsjsyiz3bdwo3co1oc> [accessed 16 August 2017]

42 I quote here directly from my own notes as I was at the festival, recording some of the acts for a BBC Radio 3 programme and I was also present at Babani’s press conference.

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